Perceptions of Beauty

Ideals of feminine beauty in fashion and physical appearance have changed frequently over the centuries. Perhaps by looking at these portrayals of "ideal beauty," someone will find a trend they'd like to re-introduce in the 21st century.

Toledo Museum Art of

A:: Classic Court (Gallery 2) *Ancient Roman, Venus,* about A.D. 161–169

Venus, the Roman goddess of love, represented the ideal of feminine beauty in ancient Rome. Her straight nose, wide-set eyes, and small mouth are perfectly symmetrical and graceful, and she sports a casual tousled hairstyle that symbolized sensuality.

B:: Gallery 6 *Mende People, Helmet Mask,* late 19th–early 20th century

This African mask shows many attributes of what the Mende people of Sierra Leone considered beautiful. The woman has a small mouth which means she is unlikely to gossip, many "neck creases" which indicate good health and money, and a high forehead which denotes intelligence and nobility. Her dark skin means she is feminine and morally pure, and her elaborate hair means she is elegant and well groomed.

C:: Gallery 15 *Anonymous British, Elizabeth I, Queen of England,* about 1588

For the Queen of England, clothes made—or at least symbolized—the woman. In the 16th century, Elizabeth I set the fashion with her shaved forehead and eyebrows, wig, white lead and vinegar face paint, red-dyed egg whites for her cheeks, and architectually structured dress. To further emphasize her beauty and purity, the Virgin Queen wore elaborate costumes embroidered with flowers—such as carnations and primroses—that identified her with the Virgin Mary.

D:: Gallery 23 *Jan Miense Molenaer, Allegory of Vanity,* 1633

This lovely Dutch woman's long, loose, blond hair is meant to be sensual because women of the 17th century typically wore their hair in a sophisticated up-do. She also has a high forehead, small nose, and round face, features that were considered the embodiment of beauty to the Dutch. But perhaps we should warn her against vanity, as beauty will eventually fade.

E:: Great Gallery (Gallery 36) *Peter Paul Rubens, The Crowning of Saint Catherine,* 1631 (1633?)
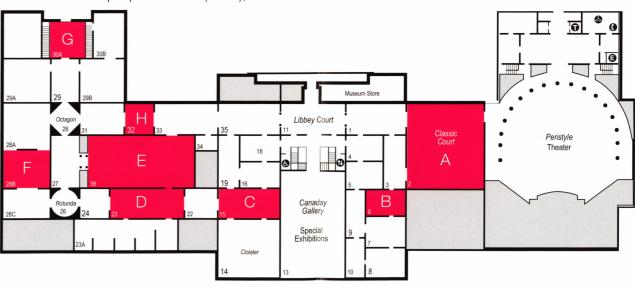
Nowadays, with skinny models parading the runways and commercials for weight-loss programs everywhere, the saying "big is beautiful" is hardly believed by most people. But in Europe in the 1600s, a voluptuous, plump figure meant, as with the Mende peoples of Africa (see B), a woman was rich and healthy; those who had a full-figured body were considered the ideal.

F:: Gallery 28B *Jean-Marc Nattier, Princess de Rohan,* 1741

This painting of Marie Sophie de Courcillon, who was regarded as one of the most beautiful women of the French court, shows her looking "natural" with powdered hair and rosy cheeks. As an added bonus, she's even reading a book called *Universal History,* which symbolizes her thirst for knowledge and makes her even more alluring and admirable.

G:: Gallery 30A India, Tanjore District, *Parvati,* about 1150–1200

This statue of the Hindu goddess Parvati perfectly exemplifies her grace, harmony, and elegance. The way her hip is thrust sideways and the dainty, elegant position of her right hand suggest that she is doing a rhythmic dance. In addition, her slim waist places an emphasis on her feminine curves, as she is meant to personify fertility.

H:: Gallery 32 Thomas Couture, *Alice Ozy,* 1855

This young woman was a famous courtesan, or someone who was paid to provide companionship to wealthy men. The painting insinuates ties to the goddess Venus, with Alice's pearl drop earring (pearls were attributes of the Goddess of Love) and the cupid pattern on the curtain above her head. Her loose hair and clothing also portrayed sensuality and ideal beauty.

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